
Why do some countries democratise while others do not? A comparison of Poland and Hungary.

Whilst the effects of the European Union and market liberalisation on post-communist democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe are well-researched, little is known about factors with variance within the area. After examining the existing literature, this paper hypothesises that political culture and pluralistic representation account for differences in democratic consolidation between Central and Eastern European EU member-states. The paper then proposes a comparative methodology, using the Most Similar Systems Design, to evaluate the hypotheses for the cases of Poland and Hungary. The operationalisation of variables is given by multiple categorical indicators; the degree of democratic consolidation is measured through the Nations in Transit Democracy score. Although the findings corroborate the hypothesis, no strong inference can be drawn from a small sample. The paper concludes by encouraging further tests of the hypothesis.

Keywords: Democratic consolidation, post-Communist Europe, comparative democracy studies, Hungary, Poland

Research question

Most states in Central and Eastern Europe,¹ members of the European Union, have developed fully democratic and consolidated regimes that, although often not *en par* with Western comparisons, are acknowledged as full democracies.² Both the application and the strength of external political conditionality through the promise of EU membership were major factors that guided the newly emergent democracies towards a sustainable and liberal regime.³ Yet, with the majority of the theory focussing on this influence, there is little research about the

¹ 'Central and Eastern Europe' shall refer to the twelve post-communist EU member-states.

² Jacques Rupnik and Jan Zielonka, "Introduction: The State of Democracy 20 Years On: Domestic and External Factors," *East European Politics & Societies* 27, no. 1 (2013).

³ David R. Cameron, "Post-Communist Democracy: The Impact of the European Union," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 23, no. 3 (2007).

variance *in between* the countries of this region. This paper will provide a theory framework for explaining different degrees of democratic consolidation in Eastern and Central Europe, and subsequently apply this theory to a comparison of Hungary and Poland.

Schedler argues that the concept of democratic consolidation has many different meanings, applied just as the researcher sees it fit.⁴ Consolidation cannot be defined through external rule-setting, as if it were an entry in a dictionary. One might be encouraged to examine why a particular regime fails to consolidate—that is, why its political regime returns to characteristics of authoritarian regimes (negative definition)— or why a particular regime is unable to ‘deepen’ its democratic quality in terms of procedures and institutions (positive definition).

O’Donnell criticises the teleological use of the concept of consolidation.⁵ He does not see the development towards a consolidated democracy as a linear path evolution, but can either be concluded successfully or get stuck, even recede. One should look at deviations from the formal standard, that is, assess how institutions actually work rather than just assuming that the formal rules are adhered to.

This paper will build on these important contributions to the literature. For too long, consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe has been regarded as a unidirectional, formal development. This paper will seek to explain deviations from linearity, in line with O’Donnell’s stipulation that consolidation need not always have the objective of a ‘final’ stage. Secondly, the research design aims at explaining the differences between different countries in Eastern and Central Europe. The clustering into different groups of states often means that distinctive pathways in particular countries *within* one group, however small, are often neglected. This research proposal seeks to fill the theoretical gap by establishing a new framework for these countries in Eastern and Central Europe. It will relate different variables to the level of consolidation.

⁴ Andreas Schedler, "Concepts of Democratic Consolidation," *LASA, Guadalajara* (1997).

⁵ Guillermo O’Donnell, "Illusions About Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 1 (1996).

Theory framework and Conceptualisation

Because of the heterogeneity in the field of democratic consolidation, this research remains limited to Central and Eastern Europe. Theories and concepts derived from the study of other regions were caught by surprise when the ‘double transition’ in post-communist regimes occurred.⁶ Consolidation in different areas of the world is affected by different independent variables. By controlling the external variables that the countries have in common, the design will use the method of comparison to analyse the different causes for diversions in post-communist, democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe. Numerous other approaches have adopted the method of small-n comparison.⁷ It is the paper’s objective to account for minor differences and divergent pathways in consolidation in Eastern and Central Europe.

Consequently, democratic consolidation will be treated as a continuous rather than dichotomous variable. Drawing the line between consolidated and non-consolidated democracies somewhere through Eastern Europe would result in some of them placed into the same group as established Western ‘benchmark’ democracies, and others into the conceptual vicinity of failed states torn by civil wars and permanent unrest. Clearly, any dichotomous approach for a rather homogeneous group of states would forgo analytical accuracy. This paper’s conception of consolidation, furthermore, is defined in negative terms: It occurs when, in the words of Stepan and Linz, all actors consider democracy to be ‘the only game in town’.⁸ This is not to say that a deepening of democratic qualities—extensive civil liberties, social and economic equality, and the like—would be irrelevant, yet these features should be conceptualised as ‘democratic quality’, rather than ‘positive’ democratic consolidation.⁹

⁶ Wolfgang Merkel, "Plausible Theory, Unexpected Results: The Rapid Democratic Consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe," *International Politics and Society* 2, no. 1 (2008).

⁷ Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics : An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Milton Park, Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

⁸ Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation : Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); "Toward Consolidated Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996).

⁹ Leonardo Morlino, *Changes for Democracy: Actors, Structures, Processes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gerardo L. Munck, "Democracy Studies: Agenda, Findings, Challenges.," in

It does not take much persuasion to imagine that a country with decade-, if not century-long democratic traditions will embed such ethos into its inherent political culture. A society can have a more favourable predisposition towards democracy through historical political and economic links with Western nations, or its own, albeit brief, experiences with democracy in national consciousness. Given that democratic consolidation presupposes democracy being ‘the only game in town’, this objective is more attainable if a majority of the population thinks so: “Democracy can only be preserved if, along with its values, a plethora of dedicated people help it thrive”.¹⁰ Another aspect of political culture that is likely to impact consolidation is the salience and depth of cultural, ethnical and political cleavages in society. Countries with a coherent national identity, where the unit of analysis is congruent with the perceived cultural *polis*, are likewise expected to feature more successful consolidation. Where a nation harbours two very distinct cultural groups with radically different views, it will be harder to accommodate democratic policymaking that not does resort to a ‘tyranny of majority’, thus fuelling resentment within the minority. *A country where political pluralism is widespread, the civil society provides a forum of engagement, and where the population regards democracy as desirable—in short, where political culture is more democratic—will therefore have a higher probability of democratic consolidation.*

Secondly, the paper hypothesises that democratic consolidation is a function of the mode and result of transition bargaining. Where demand for political reform was voiced through mass mobilisation, it expects consolidation to be more durable, whereas an outcome that divides sharply between winners and losers of political reform is likely to spark protest and hinder the universal acceptance of democracy by the losers of the transition. The institutional framework resulting from the transition can be supported by a majority of the people, or not; and it can either ameliorate tensions and cleavages within society through mechanisms that legitimate the regime (such as a constitutional referendum), or, through majoritarian rule, exacerbate them. *A*

Democratization: The State of the Art, ed. Dirk Berg-Schlosser (Opladen, Germany; Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2007).

¹⁰ András Bozóki, "Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary," *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 19, no. 3 (2011): 633.

country where the transition bargaining process has been representative of the population's political demands, and where fair representation of all members of society is secured in the resulting institutional framework, will have a higher probability of democratic consolidation.

Operationalisation

The two independent variables, *political culture and history* and *(post-)transitional representation* shall , based on the above framework, be operationalised as follows:

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Attribute (Poland)</i>	<i>Attribute (Hungary)</i>
<i>Political culture and history</i>	Impact of communist rule	Authoritarianism	Post-totalitarianism
	Historic democratic traditions	Favourable towards democracy	Few experiences with democracy
	Ethnic and cultural homogeneity	Very homogeneous	Minor ethnic conflicts
<i>(Post-) transitional representation</i>	Actors in democratic opposition	Elites and mass mobilisation	Elites
	Transition outcome	Staggered transition towards semi-presidentialism	Immediate competition, parliamentarism
	Legitimacy of Constitution	1997 referendum	Passed by FIDESZ in Parliament in 2011.

Table 1. Operationalisation and coding of indicators

For reasons of comparability with future research, the attributes for Poland and Hungary have been coded categorically.

Methodology

The paper has established its main research hypotheses and the operationalisation of the variables. The research design relies on the Most Similar Systems Design.¹¹ Two of the most similar countries within Central and Eastern Europe, Poland and Hungary, will be examined in a qualitative comparison. If the theoretical framework is accurate, one can expect a correlation between the difference in explanatory variables, and the difference in democratic consolidation. The choice of these two countries is particularly suitable for adhering to the necessity of *ceteris paribus*. Poland and Hungary commenced the wave of post-communist transitions in 1989, and featured a (comparatively) more permissive regime in the years prior.¹² Crucially, they are also

¹¹ Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *The American Political Science Review* (1971); J.S. Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation* (John W. Parker, 1843), 462.

¹² Terry Cox and Andy Furlong, "Political Transition in Hungary: An Overview," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 10, no. 3 (1994); Paul G. Lewis, "Theories of Democratization and Patterns of Regime Change in Eastern Europe," *ibid.* 13, no. 1 (1997); Valerie Bunce, "The Return of the Left and Democratic Consolidation in Poland and Hungary," in *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. András Bozóki and John T. Ishiyama (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 301.

the only two countries in the region that feature a consistent national identity and history, thus allowing for comparison of the first independent variable, *political culture*.

In order to assess the progress of democratic consolidation, the research will use the *Nations in Transit (NiT)* reports, assigning post-communist countries a democracy score, ranging from 1 (best) to 7 (worst).¹³ The data are available for the time span from 2000 until 2014; a continuously worsening democracy score shall be interpreted as the lack of sufficient consolidation. There are two reasons why the research will utilise this measurement as opposed to *Freedom House* or *Polity IV*. Firstly, it is specifically designed to observe post-communist nations and classifies relevant variables for these countries. As mentioned, this study does not aim for comparability with other regions of the world, and should therefore opt for a classification tailored to its needs. Secondly, the variance in the level of democracy between the countries in Central and Eastern Europe is small. *Polity IV* only looks at the competitive dimension of democracy, and therefore yields hardly any difference between the countries in question.

NiT features *civil society* as one of the variables determining the democracy score. In order to avoid conflation with measures of political culture and civil support for the transition, the score will be recalculated with this variable dropped. It is computed by a simple average of its components. The operationalised, independent variables will be examined qualitatively through content analysis.

Analysis

The paper will evaluate whether, as hypothesised, a difference in the independent variables between the respective countries translates into a difference in democratic consolidation. Both Poland (2005-2007) and Hungary (2010—) experienced a threat to its democratic consolidation during their respective right-wing, nationalist governments, after a rather successful experience

¹³ Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2014," <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/nations-transit>.

of democracy in the first decade after transition.¹⁴ Both governments considered the transition from communism as incomplete; talk of a ‘second revolution’ or ‘the Fourth Republic’ accompanied their ascent to power.¹⁵ Means to this end were threatening democratic pluralism and the rule of law; the experience of the economic and political transition left both parties in desire for a strong, authoritarian state.

This is evident in the *NiT* scores, worsening for Poland during the rule of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) in 2005–2007, and for Hungary during the rule of Viktor Orbán’s FIDESZ from 2010 onwards. The PiS-led government, causing Poland’s lowest democracy score of 2.58 (2008), however, was ousted in early elections;¹⁶ subsequently, measurements of democracy improved again. In contrast, FIDESZ did not only stay in power for a full 4 years but managed to consolidate its power, leading to its re-election in an advantageous electoral system in 2014.¹⁷ During their spell in government, Hungary’s *NiT* score has worsened continuously, up to 3.08. This suggests that democracy in Poland is consolidated, as the voters prevented a potential reversal, whereas it is less advanced in Hungary, where Orbán’s government was able to introduce institutional reforms that compromise democratic processes, bringing about a ‘populist democracy’.¹⁸ The next step is to evaluate whether there any differences in the theorised explanatory variables that can account for the above discrepancy.

¹⁴ Bunce, "The Return of the Left and Democratic Consolidation in Poland and Hungary."

¹⁵ Bozóki, "Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary.;" Gábor Toka and Sebastian Popa, "Hungary," in *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, ed. Sten Berglund, et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013).

¹⁶ Aleks Szczerbiak, "The Birth of a Bipolar Party System or a Referendum on a Polarizing Government? The October 2007 Polish Parliamentary Election," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 3 (2008).

¹⁷ Gábor Toka, "Constitutional Principles and Electoral Democracy in Hungary," in *Constitution Building in Consolidated Democracies: A New Beginning or Decay of a Political System?*, ed. Ellen Bos and Kalman Poczta (Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verlag, 2014).

¹⁸ Jason Wittenberg, "Back to the Future? Revolution of the Right in Hungary," in *American Political Science Association 2013 Annual Meeting* (American Political Science Association, 2013); Takis S. Pappas, "Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary," *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 01 (2014).

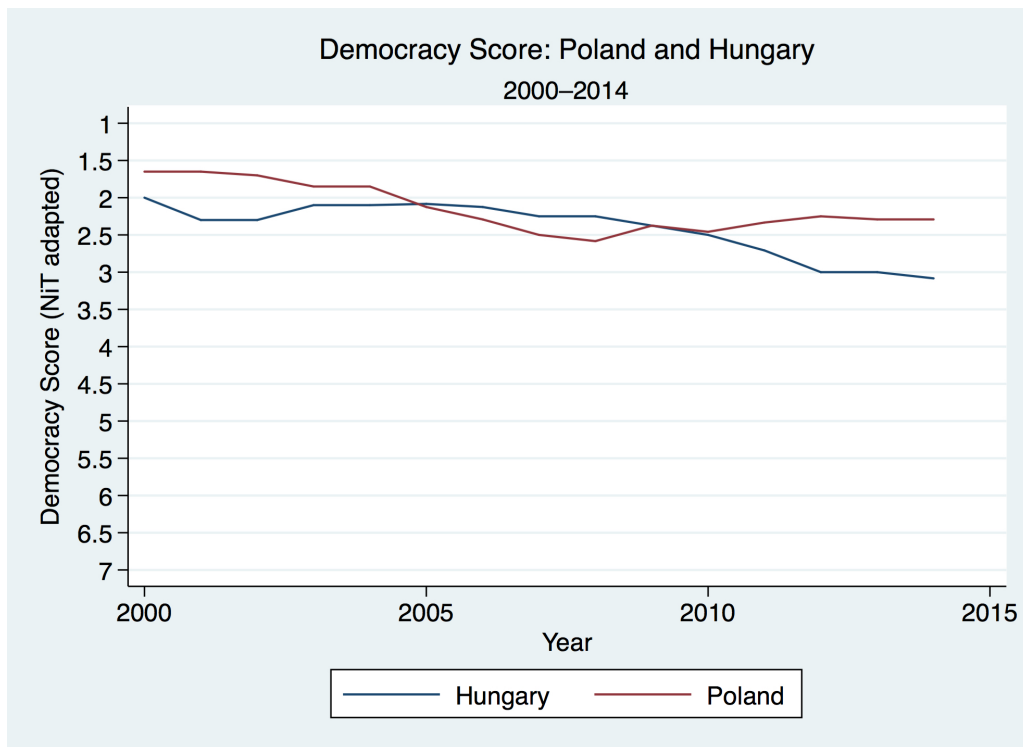


Figure 1. Nations in Transit: Democracy Scores for Poland and Hungary, 2000–2014. Reversed y-axis.

Hypothesis 1. Political culture.

Poland's political culture differs in many important respects from that of Hungary, and in many of these it facilitates democratic consolidation. Economic stagnation and an absence of political and social liberties led to frequent uprisings in both countries, yet different responses. In Poland, students and workers rebelled against price increases in 1970, 1976 and, 1980, culminating in the Solidarity trade union movement that, in 1980 achieved substantial progress before martial law was declared in 1981.¹⁹ Hungary experienced a window onto democracy in 1956, which was shut immediately by a brutal Soviet intervention. The failure of the 1956 uprising scarred Hungarian memory and prevented further mobilisation of the masses until the regime was severely weakened in 1988/89. This is also evident in Linz and Stepan's

¹⁹ Jane E. Curry, "Poland: The Politics of "God's Playground", in *Central & East European Politics. From Communism to Democracy.*, ed. Sharon L. Wolchik and Jane L. Curry (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 164.

classification of pre-transitional Poland as an authoritarian regime, and Hungary as a post-totalitarian one.²⁰

Yet, the roots of political culture go deeper. Poland's history has always been defined relative to the West—be it through German occupation or immigration to France or the United States. Although both Warsaw and Budapest turned towards the European Community immediately after transition, it is the former that is tied stronger to the West and its democratic values;²¹ it should not come as a surprise that the progressive Constitution of 1791 features proudly in national culture. Frenzel-Zagorska notes that Poland has a tradition of opposing foreign rule,²² and in relation to Communism this meant endorsement of democracy;²³ Hungarians, in contrast, are much more willing to compromise and accommodate the regime. This is also reflected in evidence that Hungarians prefer economic prosperity to democratic governance.²⁴

Poland has a strongly homogeneous society, in ethnic, cultural and religious terms. *Pace* a small minority in Lithuania and the worldwide emigrant community, its *demos* is within national borders. Although the initial fragmentation of its Parliament may seem counterintuitive, the political cleavages in the country are not particularly divisive, although there is concern about a gap between the Western and Eastern part of the country.²⁵ Hungary, in contrast, has always been defined by the conflict between the populist peasantry and the metropolitan elite in Budapest.²⁶ There is a large number of ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, and an on-going issue with the status of the Roma minority within

²⁰ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation : Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, 42–43.

²¹ Curry, "Poland: The Politics of "God's Playground", 161; Harold Wydra, *Continuities in Poland's Permanent Transition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

²² Janina Frenzel-Zagorska, "Civil Society in Poland and Hungary," *Soviet Studies* 42, no. 4 (1990): 766.

²³ Valerie Bunce, "Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience," *World Politics* 55, no. 2 (2003).

²⁴ Pew Research Center, "The Pew Global Attitudes Project. Two Decades after the Wall's Fall: End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations," (Washington, D.C. 2009), 24.

²⁵ Ben Stanley, "Poland," in *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, ed. Sten Berglund, et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013), 195.

²⁶ Emilia Palonen, "Political Polarisation and Populism in Contemporary Hungary," *Parliamentary Affairs* 62, no. 2 (2009).

Hungary.²⁷ The difficulty to find consensus on these topics was exacerbated by FIDESZ's divisive rhetoric and Orbán's conviction that those opposed to him are opposed to Hungary.²⁸

The paper finds that Poland's political culture and history is, broadly speaking, more approving of democracy and pluralism than Hungary's. This has an effect on how willing people are to support democracy and what potential there is for threats to emerge. Disillusionment and anger, triggered by a dismal economic performance and several government scandals in 2006-2010, were translated easier into support for Orbán's authoritarian steps because of the lack of a truly democratic political culture, whereas similar steps undertaken by PiS's Kaczyński raised more controversy, resonated less well with the public, and, ultimately, resulted in political defeat. This is in line with the expected findings from the theoretical model.

Hypothesis 2. Representation.

On the first glance, the transition in both countries may seem remarkably similar. The regimes along Vistula and Danube were the first ones to crumble, have round-table negotiations and see competitive elections of one sort or another. Yet, here the similarities end. Poland's democratic opposition was represented through the trade union Solidarność, founded in 1980. The representatives negotiating with the regime were backed up by millions of people in support; up to 1/3 of the adult population, including party members, joined at its zenith.²⁹ It could legitimately claim to speak on behalf of the Polish people. In Hungary, however, no such mass organisation existed. The democratic opposition was confined to the intellectual elite of the country; previous reforms and the resignation of Kadar in 1988 tempered any appeal for a true, unified mass movement in Hungary.³⁰ Rather, the fragmented opposition parties

²⁷ Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, "Social and Ideological Cleavage Formation in Post-Communist Hungary," *Europe-Asia Studies* 47, no. 7 (1995): 1178.

²⁸ Myra A. Waterbury, *Between State and Nation: Diaspora Politics and Kin-State Nationalism in Hungary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Bozóki, "Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary."; "Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Emergence of the New Right in Hungary," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 2 (2008).

²⁹ Curry, "Poland: The Politics of "God's Playground"," 164.

³⁰ Helga Welsh, "Political Transition Processes in Central and Eastern Europe," *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 4 (1994).

represented different electoral cleavages at the transition roundtable.³¹ Whereas bargaining in Poland was between elites, but taking into account mass demands, Hungary's bargaining is more akin to a backroom deal between the functional and intellectual elites of the country.³²

The outcome of the roundtable negotiations was equally divergent. Renwick points out that both opposition camps adopted different medium-term frames due to their historic experience;³³ in Poland, social reform was on the agenda, whereas the Hungarian opposition sought political change. Consequently, the result in Poland was a staggered transition with semi-free elections in 1989, and a semi-presidential institutional structure with a proportional electoral system. Hungary saw immediate electoral competition through a majoritarian electoral system, and multiple opposition parties in a parliamentary system with a strong executive. This diminishes representativeness in a country that already features salient political cleavages, translating into a very polarised party system.³⁴ The lack of mass support in transition and the electoral system only exacerbate existing tensions between the 'metropolitans' and 'peasants'—to the extent that Orbán refused to accept his loss in 2002 as legitimate.³⁵

The transition outcome was codified in significant amendments to the existing constitution at first, before being replaced with a new one altogether. In both countries, in contrast to most neighbouring ones, the new constitution was ratified rather late, and through different modes. In Poland, a popular referendum in 1997 legitimised and ratified the governing document (albeit by a thin majority and a low turnout of 42%); in Hungary, the 2014 Constitution is the result of FIDESZ's institutional advantage, and was only ratified by the party's 2/3 majority in

³¹ Gergely Egedy, "Political Conservatism in Post-Communist Hungary," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no. 3 (2009).

³² Terry Cox, "Democratization and State-Society Relations in East Central Europe: The Case of Hungary," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 23, no. 2 (2007); Terry Cox and László Vass, "Civil Society and Interest Representation in Hungarian Political Development," *ibid.* 10, no. 3 (1994).

³³ Alan Renwick, "Why Hungary and Poland Differed in 1989: The Role of Medium-Term Frames in Explaining the Outcomes of Democratic Transition," *Democratization* 13, no. 1 (2006).

³⁴ Palonen, "Political Polarisation and Populism in Contemporary Hungary."

³⁵ Toka and Popa, "Hungary," 310.

Parliament (with the main opposition party boycotting the vote). Worst of all, there was no inclusive debate about the provisions of the new constitution.³⁶

Having analysed the transition mode, the resulting institutional structure, and the legitimisation thereof through a new constitution, Poland's transition and aftermath were more inclusive and representative than Hungary's, which reflects onto the more successful democratic consolidation. The divide between winners and losers of the economic and political transition is not as sharp in the former, incentivising more people to endorse democracy as a means of conflict resolution as their voices can be heard. The more divisive structure in Hungary means that the 'losers' have fewer reasons to accept the outcome. The findings corroborate the research hypothesis.

Conclusion

This paper developed a theoretical framework to explain the variance in democratic consolidation across the post-communist member-states of the European Union. It suggested that consolidation, conceptualised negatively, is more likely to succeed if

- (a) the country has a political culture looking favourably upon democracy and pluralism, and
- (b) the transitional bargaining, along with the resulting institutions, was supported by the masses rather than elites, and accommodated representative consensus rather than competitive, majoritarian rule.

A subsequent analysis of Poland and Hungary conformed to the theory framework as Poland's stronger consolidation correlates with a more democratic political culture and a more consensual transition outcome. In Hungary, where these variables are weaker, disillusionment with democracy, widespread corruption and economic mismanagement led to the election of a right-wing populist government in 2010 that started to undermine fundamental principles of democracy. The comparison thus provides evidence for the suggested research hypothesis; yet, a small-n comparison cannot exclude the possibility of a spurious correlation. While this paper

³⁶ BBC News, "Hungary's New Constitution 'Puts Democracy at Risk'," 20 April 2011.

provides some support, a broader comparison and case testing is necessary to test the scientific validity of the theory.

(2,997 words)

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